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SUBJECT: INDIAN REACTIONS TO THE IRAQ ELECTION REFLECT
IDEOLOGICAL DIVIDES

REF: A. NEW DELHI 756

[B. NEW DELHI 594](#)

Classified By: DCM Robert O. Blake, Jr., Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

[¶1.](#) (C) Summary: The reaction of India's political parties and major newspapers to the January 30 election in Iraq predictably reflected their political orientations. The UPA government saw the election as a step forward, but unveiled no new initiatives or specific plans for greater engagement. The opposition BJP expressed wholehearted support for the election, hinted that the GOI should quickly increase its involvement and urged tough military measures against the insurgents. The Communist parties dismissed the election as flawed, downplayed its significance, and opposed any greater GOI involvement in Iraq until American forces depart. The UPA is divided, with many on its left wing sympathetic to the Communist view, which will induce continued caution. Capitalizing on the positive results of the elections, the Ambassador arranged a joint press conference with Iraqi Charge Muyad Hussain on February 4 to provide a forum for the under-exposed Charge to make observations about the conduct of the polls, offer insights about how India can assist Iraq in the future, and answer questions from the press. Embassy also plans to explore with Embassy Baghdad ways in which we might encourage India to expand its engagement in Iraq. End Summary.

Two Insider Comments

[¶2.](#) (U) Reacting to the GOI's January 31 statement that described the voter turnout as "encouraging," and a "noteworthy development," the "Times of India" diplomatic correspondent Indrani Bagchi claimed that the MEA has realized that the election has put "a stamp of legitimacy on the exercise, that will be recognized by the UN, the EU and Iraq's neighbors," and quoted a senior MEA official as saying, "the Americans have pulled it off, first in Afghanistan and now in Iraq," and "India will have to recalibrate its stance towards Iraq." Pointing out that India's Ambassador in Iraq has not been replaced following his retirement several months ago, several editorials urged the MEA to show its commitment to Iraq by filling the post. In the interim, the GOI's newly-appointed Special Envoy to West Asia, Chinmaya Gharekhan will travel throughout the region and submit a detailed report on the election's impact (septel).

[¶3.](#) (U) Leading strategic thinker K. Subrahmanyam argued that "it would be a mistake to treat the events in Iraq as peripheral to our national interests," in that India could reap benefits from a short-term alliance with the US that will far outweigh any costs thereafter. Pointing out that India has the second largest Muslim population in the world, Subrahmanyam maintained that "India cannot afford to commit a mistake when democratization of Islamic regimes is the issue." He concluded, however, that "we should protect ourselves from any major disruptive developments to our national security and interests caused by religious fundamentalist forces."

The UPA View

[¶4.](#) (C) In a February 3 meeting with Poloff, Congress MP Rashid Alvi, who is close to the Gandhi family and coterie and has an insider's view of party thinking, maintained that the Congress and the UPA would stick to the official GOI statement welcoming the election as a sign of progress. He confided, however, that many in Congress remain opposed to US Iraq policy and share the views of the Communists that India should not become too deeply involved too quickly.

Communist Views

[¶5.](#) (U) India's Communists predictably dismissed the election. Leninist CPI leader A.B. Bardhan cast doubt on the initial estimates of voter participation, and called on Iraqis to continue resistance to the "US occupation." Pro-Beijing CPI(M) Politburo member Prakash Karat struck a slightly different tone, suggesting that the Left Front "would not oppose a decision to establish relations with the new government and some level of humanitarian aid,." but

urged the GOI not to intervene further until "peace is restored, and US troops are pulled out."

¶16. (U) Left-oriented newspapers echoed these views. The "Hindu" derided US efforts to depict the election as a "turning point," saying "Washington cannot wish away the disturbing trends in the pattern of the voting," in which "a majority of Sunni voters apparently obeyed the insurgents' call for a poll boycott." The paper warned that the election could "sharpen the sectarian divide and push the country to the brink of civil war." The "Asian Age" stated that "no election held under a foreign military occupation has any legitimacy under international law."

¶17. (U) Hamid Ansari, former Indian Ambassador and prominent commentator on Islam, agreed that the GOI should "cooperate with Iraq in its reconstruction in every possible way," but that this does not mean that India should accept the "ideological predilections" of the US, which he described as: "the doctrines of pre-emption, regime change, coercive democratization, cartographic engineering and 'Islamic threat."

¶18. (U) The mass-circulation Bengali daily "Anandabazar Patrika," respected in the "Red Fort" of Calcutta, claimed that the election has "actually neutered the Leftists to a great extent," as they must now admit that an "imperialist force" has completed a successful "experiment in democracy." The paper argued that the Communists cannot continue to denounce the election without being seen to "deny the democratic process."

The BJP View

¶19. (C) The pro-BJP "Pioneer" was effusive in its praise for the election, claiming that "it clearly indicates that the over-whelming majority of Iraq's population wants not terrorism and violence but peace, democracy and the restoration of normal conditions." The newspaper urged that the best way for the US to ensure the success of Iraqi democracy is to crush "terrorism with a mailed fist," and not to remove its troops "until the job is done."

¶10. (C) In a February 4 meeting with Poloff, Retired LTG. N.S. Malik, BJP Convenor of Defense Affairs, and Vijay Vir of the BJP National Council congratulated the US for a "job well done" in Iraq, and expressed support for the US troops for "undertaking a difficult job under trying circumstances." Malik maintained that while BJP sympathies are with the US in Iraq, it cannot support increased Indian involvement until the UN takes over from the US. He predicted that a fully democratic and sovereign democratic government will be in place in Iraq "within the year," and suggested that the UN should be invited in shortly thereafter.

¶11. (C) General Malik pointed out that Iraq has long been "India's greatest friend in the Middle East," that the Indian armed forces trained the Iraqis for many years, and that Indian companies built much of Iraq's infrastructure. According to Malik, Indian firms are eager to get back into Iraq. Vir pointed out that the vast majority of Indian Muslims are Sunni, and the UPA wants their backing, and will not antagonize them by backing US actions in Iraq which they view as "anti-Islamic."

Will the Left Come Around?

¶12. (U) Some insiders have predicted that the Left will soften its resistance and quietly acquiesce to greater GOI involvement in Iraq. Quoting "top government sources," the "Times of India" Bagchi claimed that the UPA would soon initiate a dialogue on Iraq and that the Left parties will "be more pragmatic and take reality into consideration," and claimed that "the first steps on the realistic road have already been taken."

¶13. (C) Congress MP Alvi dismissed Communist opposition to increased Indian involvement in Iraq, stating that "they oppose any US policy and are not important." Alvi claimed that both PM Singh and Sonia Gandhi had stated to him that the Communists could not change Indian foreign policy. According to Alvi, the Congress leadership has determined that the Left's principal concern is acquiring and maintaining power in its three "red forts (West Bengal, Tripura, Kerala)," and that critical statements were meant primarily to appease its supporters there. Alvi maintained that rhetoric aside, the Left would not withdraw support from the UPA government on any foreign policy issue as long as the only alternative is the BJP's return to power.

Enthusiastic Shia Support

¶14. (U) Indian Shias continue to express strong public

support for the elections (Ref B). Leading Shia organizations held a public meeting in Lucknow on February 2 to "rejoice on the occasion of the first peaceful elections in Iraq in five decades," and to "thank all those countries who have contributed significantly to ensure the safety and security of Shia religious shrines in Iraq from terrorists." At the meeting, Shia leader Hasan Mehdi compared Sunni terrorists in Iraq to those in J&K, noting that they are opposed to democracy and want to prevent people from voting.

¶15. (C) Shia Leader Zaheer Zaidi told Poloff February 3 that Indian Shias welcomed the election and anticipate that conditions will soon stabilize in Iraq enough for large numbers of them to begin visiting the Iraqi holy places in peace. Zaidi praised Ayatollah Sistani for his role in the elections, confirmed that Indian Shias acknowledge him as their leader and would take direction from him regarding democratization. He noted that Indian Shia leaders regularly travel to Iraq to meet with Sistani and his aides.

Some Shia Skepticism

¶16. (U) Leading Shia journalist Saeed Naqvi took a more skeptical view, arguing that "the voter turnout should be seen for what it is: a means to get the Americans out. Under Grand Ayatollah Sistani's leadership, the Shias decided on "tactics of patience," but "the dangerous trek to the polling booths was their way of demonstrating that they would go to any lengths to ensure than occupation of their ends. If the Americans read the meaning of the turnout in any other way, they will face Iraq's 60 percent population turning upon them the way the 20 percent has over the last two years," he commented.

And Sunni Disdain

¶17. (C) India's dominant Sunni press has been almost uniformly negative, condemning the election as "a sham exercise aimed at serving colonial interests and nothing else," and describing the elections as "neither free, nor fair, nor democratic," as "they took place under the state of emergency and the threat to use force," with candidates "hand-picked by an occupying power with a monopoly on TV reporting." One Urdu daily described the elections as a "stage-managed show with no credibility," claiming that the Iraqis have "rejected the Americans, their stooges and their policies in Iraq." in that both "those who voted and those who boycotted" want to "get rid of their common enemy."

Embassy Outreach

¶18. (SBU) The Ambassador and Iraqi Charge Muyad Hussain held a joint press conference on February 4. In his opening statement, Hussain highlighted the prospects that successful elections presented to the Indo-Iraq relationship. "There are lots of opportunities for the Indian business community to re-establish its old position....Indians have long experience in working in the region and Iraq can benefit from their expertise in various fields: construction, engineering, oil exploration, and information technology," he stated. Responding to a question from a reporter, Hussain went on to say that Iraq needs more assistance from the international community and was also looking to India to provide more help, but stopped short of saying what specific assistance Iraq sought from the GOI. The event generated generally favorable coverage, with most local press focusing on whether the GOI will see the polls as the impetus to step up its engagement in Iraq.

¶19. (C) Behind the scenes, post will continue to encourage the GOI toward greater involvement in Iraq, recognizing, however, that in order to do this, the GOI will have to proceed cautiously with incremental steps that do not require Parliamentary approval, so as not to raise the ire of those that oppose such moves within its own coalition.

Comment

¶20. (C) The election results caught the UPA and the Indian political class by surprise, but opposition to US Iraq policy remains deep-rooted, and one successful election was not enough to swing Indian popular opinion decisively in favor of greater GOI engagement in Iraq. Although the January 30 election had a positive impact on popular political sentiments, and may yet influence GOI policy, the UPA leadership appears determined to move very cautiously so as not to get too far out front of the population. Embassy plans to consult Embassy Baghdad on specific ways that we might encourage India to expand its engagement within the political parameters outlined above.

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